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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRUSSELS 000189

SIPDIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (ADDED PARA MARKINGS)

V S A LIVE MSG  
FOR GENERAL PETRAEUS FROM CHARGE BUSH.

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/10/2019  
TAGS: MARR MOPS PREL AF BE  
SUBJECT: YOUR MEETING WITH BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER DE GUCHT

Classified By: CDA Wayne Bush for reason 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) General Petraeus, your meeting with Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht comes at an ideal time to reinforce our efforts to secure greater Belgian participation in ISAF and increased Belgian support for Afghanistan development and reconstruction efforts. The meeting is an opportunity to recognize and express appreciation for the turnaround in the direction of Belgian defense policy in the past year, to solicit Belgian thoughts on the way ahead and share your own, and to encourage the government to continue down the politically difficult path of expanding its military and development commitment to Afghanistan. Your meeting will reinforce the sense of genuine partnership between the U.S. and Belgium to accomplish the ISAF Mission.

¶2. (C) Belgium's approach to Afghanistan and to cooperation with U.S. military efforts generally experienced a sharp turnaround after the December, 2007 arrival of Pieter De Crem as Defense Minister in a new coalition government. De Crem, a Flemish Christian Democrat, has worked with Foreign Minister De Gucht, a Flemish Liberal (i.e., conservative) to make the case publicly for the need for Belgian involvement in Afghanistan in the context of a "success strategy" that with time and sustained international commitment, will lead to an "independent and law abiding Afghanistan to which the international community can transfer all responsibilities." De Crem has traveled frequently to Afghanistan, including trips in 2008 with General Craddock and to lead a parliamentary and media delegation to visit Belgian forces. In a visit to Washington in 2008, De Crem described Belgium's desire to become the indispensable small ally of the United States.

¶3. (C) Belgium has begun to match rhetoric with action. Of 1200 deployed Belgian forces worldwide, some 500 are in Afghanistan. Belgium handed responsibility for operation of Kabul airport to Hungary on October 1, but continues to provide 280 troops for airport security, and provides the facility's deputy commander. More importantly, it has deployed four F-16s to Kandahar together with 100 support personnel, and a 70-person Belgian OMLT arrived in Kabul in January for certification prior to deployment to its operational area in the north. Belgium also supplies a 24-person EOD team for the German-led PRT in Kunduz, a C-130 and crew to support F-16 operations, and 40 liaison and support personnel at ISAF headquarters. Belgium has also deployed 200 troops to Kosovo, 330 to UNIFIL in Lebanon, 300 to training missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo

(Belgium's most visible foreign policy priority) and Benin, and 70 special forces to the European force in Chad.

¶4. (C) In 2009, we would like to see Belgium deploy an additional OMLT, provide an AWACS crew as part of the NATO AWACS mission, and expand its development assistance, which is funneled through international organizations and has totaled close to 40 million dollars since 2003. This will all be very hard to achieve in the current political and economic climate. Even harder to attain in 2010 would be for Belgium to sponsor a PRT and provide police trainers and engineering units. Efforts to expand Belgium's role in Afghanistan will meet strong opposition from the francophone socialists who are part of the governing coalition and who believe that the allies' efforts in Afghanistan have been too heavily focused on military action. Those in the Belgian government and parliament who support active Belgian participation in Afghanistan recognize the importance and difficulty of addressing the impact of opium production and the safe havens in Pakistan for Taliban militants and their command and control. The Belgian military is financially constrained, and over the past 18 months has sold equipment to generate funds and begun restructuring to reduce personnel costs and reduce the average age of soldiers, which is currently above 40 years.

¶5. (C) The Embassy assesses that Belgium's Afghanistan policy has been driven by Defense Minister De Crem. Foreign Minister De Gucht has supported the policy publicly, but has strong reservations. He and others in the Belgian government share a strong distrust of President Karzai, and question the utility of supporting a government they perceive as corrupt. De Gucht has resisted the deployment of Belgian forces to the south of Afghanistan, and has blocked the utilization of NATO's Afghanistan National Army Trust Fund for ANA sustainment costs because he fears doing so would imply an open ended commitment by Belgium and other NATO allies, a perception the embassy is working to dispel. There has been no reply from the Belgian government to our requests for Belgium to contribute 10 million dollars annually for ANA sustainment, or to contribute troops and materiel to security for the 2009 elections.

¶6. (C) Objectives/suggested talking points:

- Thank De Gucht for Belgium's expanding military and development contributions to Afghanistan;
- Share your current thoughts on the way forward;
- Share your assessment of the Afghanistan government and its future;
- Solicit De Gucht's input on critical factors in achieving success in Afghanistan;
- Encourage De Gucht to support continued expansion of Belgium's role.
- Welcome the deployment of F-16s in the south of Afghanistan, and urge De Gucht to allow other Belgian elements to deploy in the south;
- Urge additional and less restrictive military contributions to ISAF; increased development assistance; financial support for ANA sustainment; and, agreement to use the NATO trust fund mechanism for ANA sustainment.
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